
Classical mythology has been utilized as an art historical subject for paintings, sculptures, and drawings beginning with ancient Greece and the birth of these myths through the twenty-first century. This book focuses on the period of Romanticism in French art beginning in the late-eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century.

Dorothy Johnson, an art historian at the University of Iowa, argues that with the development of French Romantic art, mythology was to become part of a visual language that would become central to the communication of ideas concerning modern mores, culture, and the human condition. Johnson examines the visual imagery of these Classical tales in relation to the writings on allegory, psychology, and physiology during this period. She argues that myths in French Romantic art emphasized a psychological dimension that paralleled the birth of modern psychiatry. This art also communicated new emotional and psychological truths to the audience of the period including themes of Eros and desire, the relationship of self-identity to sexual identity, the nature of suffering and death, as well as the extreme psychological states that lead to depression, suicide, and murder.

The artist Jacques Louis David would begin to express the psychological dimensions of myth that would be articulated more fully in the works of his students. This is exemplified in Girodet’s painting, The Sleep of Endymion (1791), where the truths of human nature, in this case, Eros or love, are explored with a new psychological depth. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres would continue delving into the ideas of human psychology, in this case self-identity or the exploration of the self. Johnson goes on to bring the issue of gender into this psychological interpretation of myth in nineteenth-century French art. With the that century’s burgeoning discourse on hysteria and nervous diseases in women, Johnson demonstrates how these ideas permeated the mythological depictions of the time such as in the sculpture, Psyche Abandoned (1790) by Augustin Pajou as well as in the later painting by Eugène Delacroix of Medea Pursued and about to Kill her Children (1838). With Pajou, the viewer is encouraged to empathize with Psyche’s suffering whereas Delacroix’s Medea is in a frenzied psychological state that drives her to murder.

This book is well-written and sheds new light on the subject of mythology in French Romantic art. Although there are only twelve color illustrations, many black and white images are reproduced to elucidate ideas and to present visual examples. Although this book can be read by a general audience, because of the specialized focus of its subject matter, it is recommended for students and scholars interested in nineteenth-century art history.

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